INTRODUCTION
Music and Aesthetics in the 18th century

A natural, spontaneous and unaffected song is a series of impassioned notes having the character of the emotion from which it sprang. Art imitates these expressions of passion through notes, which by themselves are unremarkable and betray nothing of emotion. No one would say that a single tone played on the organ or harpsichord sounds passionate.

--Kirnberger, “Melodie,” Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste (1771-1774)¹

It is true that a large part of the disturbing effect often produced by the inspired works of great composers comes from their orchestration. ... Every instrument, whatever its distinctive effect in a particular instance, is capable of a hundred others, and it is a foolish delusion to suppose, for example, that strength and power can only be expressed by them all playing together. A single tone sounded by this or that instrument can often produce inner turmoil.

--E.T.A. Hoffmann, from Kreisleriana, “On a Remark of Sacchini’s” (1810)²

¹Nancy Kovaleff Baker, Thomas Christensen, ed., Aesthetics and the Art of Musical Composition in the German Enlightenment: Selected Writings of Johann Georg Sulzer and Heinrich Christoph Koch, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 91. Emphasis added. Where no translator is cited, the translations are mine, and in these cases, I have provided the original language.
These strikingly contradictory statements about the emotional power of music’s constituent sounds testify to a profound transformation of musical aesthetics. During the late 18\textsuperscript{th} and early 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries, instrumental music, formerly subordinate to vocal music and shackled to the doctrine of imitation, dramatically emerged as a powerful genre of art. Instrumental music became the subject of much rhapsodic writing by the early romantics, described with a host of passionate adjectives: no longer vague and confused, it became “transcendental,” it was “impregnated with divine spirit” and expressed “infinite longing”; this was music supposedly free of “extra-musical” associations, unhindered by mere language, and complete unto itself. We generally call this emergence the “rise” of instrumental music, and most narratives of this emergence emphasize how late 18\textsuperscript{th}-century music depended on contemporary philosophical developments. Scholars have turned to formalism, idealism, and the idea of “absolute” music to explain the aesthetic preconditions for instrumental music’s new prominence. Mark Evan Bonds, for example, in his identification of German idealism as the foundation for the rise of instrumental music, denies that there were any changes to actual compositional practice, claiming, “The new aesthetics of instrumental music reflected fundamental transformations in contemporary philosophy and general aesthetics that were \textit{unrelated to the music of the time}.” \textsuperscript{3} Likewise Carl Dahlhaus prizes the concept of “absolute music,” Lydia Goehr stresses the emergence of the “work-concept,” John Neubauer calls it formalism; Daniel Chua, deploying a

dialectic that skirts paradox, claims, “…the meaning of absolute music resides in the fact that it has no meaning.”

This selective use of 18th-century philosophical sources creates further problems for our understanding of instrumental music: in marveling at the ideal and infinite, we take ourselves ever further from musical practice. Idealism and formalism certainly played important roles in this aesthetic shift as part of the theoretical backdrop, but our fascination with these concepts glosses over profound changes within late 18th century musical practices, and marginalizes the fact that contemporary philosophies often addressed music without recourse to the abstract or the ideal.

Returning to the shift revealed by the opening quotes, we see what differs between the two authors is that Kirnberger emphasizes the importance of “correct composition,” while Hoffmann is more engaged with the actual medium of sound. Kirnberger’s dismissal of the passion of individual tones was consistent with the opinions of his contemporaries, many of whom sought to show how music transcended its mere sounds. By contrast, Hoffmann’s belief in the tumultuous power of single tones reflects a general fascination with the immediate power of the differing sonorities, or timbres. By shunning the abstract and examining the rapidly transforming attitudes towards, uses for, and experiments with the actual musical medium, we shall construct a new

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and striking narrative of the aesthetics of the late 18th and early 19th century.

The emergence of the concept of timbre did not simply imply an awareness of tone-color, but rather signified a new attitude towards the musical medium and its inherent capacity for expression. Take the development of orchestration during the 18th century, which has been treated as a kind of side effect of the rise of instrumental music, an inevitable outcome of the birth of the modern conception of the musical work. I argue that, rather than being a side effect, the concept orchestration is tied to the central tenets of what made this aesthetic turnabout possible. The early 18th century critics who argued so eloquently for varying kinds of imitation did so because to them an individual musical sound—a single note played on an oboe, for example—was completely meaningless. Throughout the 18th century, however, composers, musicians, theorists, philosophers and scientists became increasingly fascinated with the qualities—both acoustical and emotional—inherent in tones. Returning to the shift revealed by the opening quotes, we see what differs between the two authors is that Kirnberger emphasizes the importance of “correct composition,” while Hoffmann is more engaged with the actual medium of sound. Granted, one could argue that Kirnberger may have had in mind an isolated keyboard instrument while Hoffmann was imagining the role of a single instrument within an orchestra—that is, that this difference was one of context. Looking more broadly at the aesthetics of this time, however, we see that Kirnberger’s dismissal of the passion of individual tones was consistent with the opinions of his contemporaries, many of whom
sought to show how music transcended its mere sounds. By contrast, Hoffmann’s belief in the tumultuous power of single tones reflects a more general fascination with the immediate power of the differing sonorities, or timbres, within orchestral music. Single tones, removed from a musical context, while not artworks in themselves, were nonetheless powerful. Wackenroder’s bold claim in 1799 that “… no other art but music exists that has a raw material which is, in and of itself, already impregnated with such divine spirit...”\(^5\) would have been unthinkable half a century earlier, when writers such as Noël Pluche and Charles Batteux complained that instrumental music often resembled paint splatters thrown upon a canvas.

Because many of the developments of this period’s interest in sensation and immediacy—noisy battle symphonies, bizarre instruments, etc.—were criticized by later generations who espoused the aesthetics of formalism, their importance to the musical culture of their time has remained hidden. Many contributions from this period have been incorporated into or overshadowed by romantic aesthetics: Herder’s philosophy has been little studied in the wake of his successor Hegel, the kitsch orchestrions (mechanical orchestras) that today play popular tunes in cafés seem distant from the culture of Haydn and Beethoven, and the fad for “effect rich” instrumentation was been mediated by the demand for formal coherence. Yet the general tendency to ignore these seemingly marginal aspects of 18\(^{th}\)- and 19\(^{th}\)-century

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culture results in an overly simplified narrative of change during the period; the traditional story of the emancipation of instrumental music and the birth of “absolute” music treats the aesthetic shift as a kind of *deus ex machina* propagated by abstract philosophy.

This dissertation explores the development of the concept of timbre from its birth in the writings of Rousseau through its crystallization in the early 19th century with a widespread obsession with *effect*. Each chapter aims to illuminate the impact in different registers of musical culture of this new focus on the musical medium: Chapter One explores the idea of musical imitation and attitudes towards the music’s medium at the beginning of the 18th century, examining the ways in which the use of the metaphor of color both reveals how thinkers conceptualized music, and also how it ultimately altered musical discourse. The use of the distinction between design and color that was borrowed from 17th century painting debates provided a concrete vocabulary for discussing musical parameters and their intrinsic values; Newtonian analogies between color and pitch, which led to the invention of ocular harpsichord, caused many thinkers to scrutinize the relative aesthetic value of color and tone, leading to some of the most adamant affirmations of the power of tone. Not only did these developments contribute to today’s fundamental musical vocabulary, they also shaped the general conception of what music was, its relation to the other arts, and its capacity for expression.

Chapter Two charts the emergence of the concept of timbre and the earliest orchestration treatises, examining how 18th-century authors increasingly attributed instruments—in particular the winds—with their
own voices and characters. Chapter Three examines the philosophical attitudes towards transience and sensation in the writings of Kant and Herder, and the ways in which Herder’s demand for a “musical monadology” reflected a new and fast-spreading belief in the aesthetic power of single tones. Chapter Four examines how the widespread interest in timbre, instrumental sonority, and orchestration culminated in the early 19th century in an intense fascination with novel sounds and special effects, testified to by the proliferation of “Turkish” and battle symphonies, massive operatic accompaniments, and the invention of the “orchestra machine.” This frenzied interest in sonority exasperated critics, many of whom begged for a more judicious use of instruments. Critics developed the language of formalism, I argue, in part to explain the deficiencies of music that misused instruments or aimed primarily for shallow effects.

A primary goal of the project is to bring together areas of research left largely out of touch with each other by traditional musicological scholarship. Currently, many theoretical studies of the 18th and 19th centuries rarely speak to practical aspects of musical culture. Modern conceptions of the rise of instrumental music and the birth of musical romanticism, for example, focus predominantly on abstract philosophies. Dahlhaus, Bonds, Neubauer, and Goehr all highlight fascinating changes within philosophical discourse, but rarely relate these studies to actual music composed in the period. Instead, scholars tend to stress that no connection is necessary: Schroeder, for example, writes, “Aesthetics, as a branch of philosophical inquiry, has its own principles and procedures, and need not be disturbed by the
approaches to art emerging at the same time.” Aesthetics is, of course, a study in its own right, but Schroeder’s and other scholars’ comfort with the separation between theory and practice discourages the discovery of connections between philosophy, composition, and even instrument building. On the other hand, many studies of musical practice do not even mention philosophical aesthetics. Except in rare cases, organology scholars treat the instruments of the 18th and 19th centuries as existing in a near vacuum, completely separate from other aspects of musical culture. Ord-Hume and Haspels, for example, have documented many instruments’ mechanisms in dazzling detail, but do not connect their subjects to any of the major aesthetic debates of their instruments’ periods. Yet, the concept of timbre came into being through a confluence of developments in philosophy, composition, music theory, and instrument making. Therefore the study of timbre necessitates opening up lines of communication between aesthetics and organology, abstract theory and actual compositions.

By stressing the many changes within the musical medium—the use composers made of instrumental sonorities, the importance of immediate sensation in aesthetic philosophies, and the perceived value of timbre and sonority—we find that absolute music emerged out of an extended struggle: listeners, critics, and composers first had to reevaluate music on the level of the single note before they could argue that combinations of tones created a self-sufficient artwork. Timbre

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needed to be discovered, obsessed over, and even abused before it could be understood and accepted as a musical element.